Castlemaine Naturalist

December 2016

Vol. 41.11 #449

Monthly newsletter of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Powerful Owl chick - photo Noel Young

Moths of Victoria – and Castlemaine

CFNC members were fortunate to have Marilyn Hewish as guest speaker at the Club's November meeting. Marilyn is a distinguished naturalist, who received the Australian Natural History Medallion in 2013 for her decades of work on Australian birds and her more recent contributions to studies of the moths of Victoria. She told us how she had become a "moth addict" and that most of the commonly stated ways to distinguish moths and butterflies are myths – some moths are active during daylight, many are highly coloured (not "brown and boring"), some have clubbed antennae. The technical difference is in the way the forewings and hindwings are linked – needing microscopic examination! Moths and their caterpillars play a major ecological role, for example as a significant food source for birds, bats, reptiles, small mammals and larger invertebrates. Some caterpillars feed on leaf litter, thus recycling nutrients and reducing the intensity of fires. Some day-flying moths pollinate flowers. Though butterflies are more familiar to most naturalists, they are far outnumbered by moth species in Australia: about 400 species of butterflies and more than 20,000 moths (the exact figure is not known). The studies of Victorian moths are in very early stages compared to our knowledge of Australian birds.

Marilyn and Dean are frequently in the field – at night (even when cold and wet), surveying moths at sites across Victoria. They often record large extensions in distributions, species not previously known from the state, and even species new to science. As a volunteer at Melbourne Museum, Marilyn works with Peter Marriott in sorting, identifying and cataloguing the museum's huge moth collection. Peter initiated the *Moths of Victoria* series of field guides. Seven volumes have been published, with Marilyn as principal author on two, co-author on one and editorial team member on the remainder. The series is ongoing, with 12-15 volumes needed to cover the larger Victorian moths. CDs provided with each volume have additional details (books available through the Entomological Society of Victoria). Marilyn illustrated her talk with photographs showing the diverse sizes, colours and patterning of Victorian moths – only some are brown and none seem boring!

After the meeting, members were able to observe some local moths attracted to the bright light and white sheet set up by Marilyn and her husband Dean outside the meeting room. On a windy night, with rain threatening, there were not many moths around – but most of those photographed and later identified proved to be interesting. Marilyn has provided images and notes on 7 of these, as well as on 2 more recorded on the following morning during a walk in Kalimna Park.

Among those observed on the light sheet after the meeting, Arctiidae *Halone ophiodes* (Cryptic Halone) is uncommon in Victoria, with scattered records across the central and eastern parts of the state. However there is one record for Castlemaine in Vol. 2 of MoV. The colour varies. Some specimens have much more white on the forewings. Marilyn's only previous sighting was at Falls Creek in the Alps in 2011.

Halone ophiodes

Scoparia syntaracta

Apple Looper

The small moth Crambidae *Scoparia syntaracta* is moderately common in southern Victoria. This species has not yet been covered in the MoV series. The Apple Looper, Geometridae *Phrissogonus laticostata* is very common and widespread across the state (MoV Vol. 3 pages 30-31).

Marilyn had not seen this moth (right), a species in the family Lasiocampidae, in the field. It has not been described or named (MoV Vol. 1, pages 10-11, has 4 records but no photos of the living moth), with the few records widespread across central and northern Victoria. Like several others in the family, this species sometimes plays dead when disturbed.

The Native Budworm Noctuidae *Helicoverpa punctigera* is a very common species in cities, towns, disturbed sites and grasslands. The caterpillar is a pest on many crops. Not yet covered in MoV.

Two small elongated moths were seen – neither have been covered in MoV yet. Both have long curved palps protruding from the head. The gold-tinted one, Oecophoridae *Philobota latifissella*, has been observed by Marilyn in Bacchus Marsh, the Bendigo Whipstick and Mitchell River NP (Gippsland). The silvery one, Oecophoridae *Zacorus carus*, has been recorded at Langwarrin by Peter Marriott but was a new sighting for Marilyn.

Helicoverpa punctigera

Philobota latifissella

Zacorus carus

During the evening the appreciative audience of members and visitors learnt about the diverse range of moths to be found in Victoria, and the essential role of volunteers at Museum Victoria in cataloguing the Museum's collection. We then saw how moth surveys in the field are carried out, and on a damp windy night gained an appreciation of the challenges and rewards involved.

Thanks to Marilyn Hewish for the photographs, and for valuable advice on the draft of this article. Our thanks also to Dean for assisting with recalcitrant computers and for setting up the light sheet.

Peter Turner

Members were deeply saddened by the passing of Ern Perkins OAM on November 1, 2016.

Ern Perkins was a founding member of our club in 1976 and for the next forty years worked quietly and diligently building and documenting a vast knowledge of the natural environment of our district. He shared this knowledge generously and became widely respected, locally and throughout the state and country, among expert and budding naturalists alike. He embraced all the changes in technology that came his way. He always invited input from fellow members and generously attributed his work to the Club when we all knew most of what he achieved was his work alone - ably assisted by Lesley, who supported him in all that he did. Many of us wanted to assist his work but we could not quite match his ability to get the task done.

Over the months ahead, the volume of his work and the legacy he has left for all naturalists and environmentalists will slowly be realised. We have a huge task ahead of us to honour, maintain and build upon his vast efforts. A giant tree has fallen.

Geraldine Harris

Photo observations

Powerful Owls in the Botanical Gardens

On November 3 while checking out the Botanical gardens I discovered that a pair of Powerful Owls with a young chick were in residence, roosting high in one of the Stone Pines. The scattering of pellet remains below the tree indicated that they had been there for a time - possibly 2 or 3 weeks. I photographed them again on November 9, but on a later visit they were higher in the branches and worthwhile photos were impossible. On November 27 they appear to have departed. A search of other likely trees proved unsuccessful.

Powerful Owls have been recorded visiting the gardens since I joined the club in 2007. I know of one prior breeding - I recorded an adult with a juvenile on October 2nd, 2008. I came across them sitting together on a low branch over the creek. A perfect photo, but I had no camera. This was my "fish" story - the one that got away! The gardeners said there had been two chicks but one died. My only photo was in late October 2009, of a young male (possibly the same juvenile) which for a time roosted in the Mexican Cypress tree in the north end (see CN#371)

Sporadic sightings of adults continued until my last sighting of a Powerful Owl in the gardens in November of 2010 - using the same tree. As they seem to habitually favour certain roosting trees, it was probably the same bird.

I had better luck with the current lot. This time I had a camera with me (usually do, having learnt the lesson), and the Owls, although high in the tree, were not in an obscured position, except for mother who always contrived to have her back to the audience. The rather cute chick still had fluffy white down in front, but otherwise fully feathered. The adult clutching prey was in full doze mode, but I managed to catch an eye-opener moment after an extraneous noise (not by me).

- Noel Young

Debbie Worland - Eastern Bronze Caladenia

In one of the best spring wildflower seasons we have had for a while, Debbie Worland found a small stand of Eastern Bronze Caladenia *Caladenia transitoria* on the back road from Fryerstown to the Railway Dam track.

Tawny-crowned Honeyeater in Barkers Creek

By Chris Timewell (with thanks to Bonnie and Tanya)

Connecting Country's Bonnie Humphreys has been specialising in the plants and vegetation of the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds. However, in the past couple of years, she's expanded her interests to include photography of the local birds.

Photo by Bonnie Humphreys

On 19 November 2016, she was attempting to photograph an elusive cuckoo heard calling on her property near White Gum Rd in Barkers Creek. A different bird, one that she hadn't seen before, landed briefly in a dead wattle before flying off again. Bonnie managed a few quick snaps. She brought these photos into the office on the following Monday, where her workmate Tanya Loos helped her to identify it as an immature Tawny-crowned Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris melanops*). This species is in the same genus as the locally abundant New Holland Honeyeater (*P. novaehollandiae*).

A Tawny-crowned Honeyeater is a very unusual sighting for the Castlemaine district, but not unprecedented. The Tawny-crowned Honeyeater is already included on the club's bird list. From my quick review of past Castlemaine Naturalist newsletters, the only previous local sighting that I can find was more than 20 years ago. In the April 1991 newsletter, G.B. (George Broadway?) reported that a Tawny-crowned Honeyeater had recently been seen in 'the area near the Loddon Gaol'. Are people aware of any other local sightings of this species?

The Australian bird bible, HANZAB, has the following relevant information about the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater:

1. Usually inhabits heathland, mostly in coastal regions of temperate zone, but also in semi-arid regions with sandplains. In Victoria, it has a scattered distribution in coastal regions, especially around Mallacoota, Gippsland Lakes, Wilsons Prom, Otways and west coast. Also widespread in western district of Victoria, Wimmera and Mallee. Central Victoria is not a known location.

2. Prefers low dry heathland with a complex floristic composition, usually not more than 2 metres in height. Often areas dominated by Banksia and She-oaks, sometimes with scattered emergent trees. Occasionally in Mallee. Rarely in woodland or other types of open forest with a heathy or shrubby understorey.

3. Known to perch on top of shrubs, twigs, sticks or artificial structures above the height of the heathland. However, usually shy and elusive. Normally occur singly, pairs or family groups. Sometimes in small flocks.

4. Little is known of its movements. Considered most likely to be sedentary or resident, but may be locally nomadic depending on food availability. It may be a seasonal visitor in some locations. It is speculated that they may make occasional larger-scale movements between coastal and inland locations, although the evidence to support this is scant. Very little is known about their behaviour, and there is no published information about the dispersal movements by immature birds.

Was this single Tawny-crowned Honeyeater a bit lost, or is the local area part of a regular transit route for small number of this species? Or perhaps there are small numbers around locally in certain years that are rarely detected.

Wildlife Observations in December (1946)

George Broadway

December 1946 was a scanty month for readers' specimens and observations, I wonder why. Perhaps people were too involved with pre-Xmas activities to be out in the bush.

From Dadswells Bridge came some egg sacs of the Bird-dropping spider, *Calaenia excavata*. Found most frequently on fruit trees, they are camouflaged very well as bird poo. Often the spider is found close by.

A spider specimen was one of the Nephilas which build very large, strong webs.

A moth was a Drinker or Snout Moth the caterpillar of which is one of the most beautifully camouflaged of grubs on Eucalypts.

In the insect department there were specimens of brilliant red and electric blue plant bugs of the Shield Bug subfamily, *Tectocoris lineola*. It is noted that the colouring is so variable that it has been described under at least eight different names. Being a bug it feeds by sucking out plant juices.

From Hamilton came a Wanderer or Monarch butterfly. It was noted that it emerged from chrysalis, not a cocoon.

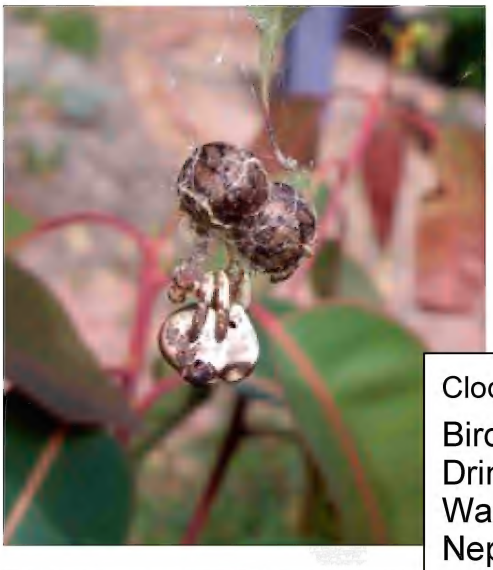
The Green Vegetable Bugs from Armadale (Vic) were *Nezara viridula*, an introduced pest of beans, etc. They breed in rubbish heaps so good garden hygiene is the best method of control.

Betty in Moonee Ponds had sent in some small soft spheres which were identified as the eggs of the garden snail. They are laid in masses a couple of centimetres below ground.

Arthur Christie from Margaret River had observed a "little grey, rat-faced animal with the tail tip black and bushy". This turned out be a Brush-tailed Phascogale, *Phascogale penicillata*. This was described as being much less plentiful than it used to be when it was a major nuisance to poultry keepers.

Finally some small millipedes, related to centipedes but vegetarian and therefore destructive in the garden.

On the Boys and Girls page George Bennett won a prize of 2/6 for his account of magpies at dusk making a lot of noise in big box tree. Later when the dusk had deepened he noticed that the magpies were gliding to another tree where they settled down quietly for the night. Frank Robinson, the Editor of the page explained that magpies usually go to bed carolling, but then having drawn attention to what would appear to be their roosting tree, they wait till it is dark and then sneak away in complete silence to another tree. Presumably a cunning ruse to deceive possible enemies



Clockwise from top left:

Bird-dropping spider,
Drinker Moth larva, Kulkyne
Wanderer pupa
Nephila spider, female

Mystery Plant - Geraldine Harris

Austral Sunray - Triptilodiscus pygmaeus - last months' mystery plant

tri: three; *ptilos*: feathered; *discos*: disk; the seeds usually have three feathery bristles.

A small plant less than 5cm high (up to 20cm in good conditions) with tiny terminal yellow daisy flowers (with tube florets only, no petals) that are bent outwards. The flower has about five floral leaves that extend beyond the flowers. The alternate leaves are 2cm long with long scattered hairs.

Austral Sunray are moderately common in open grassland and woodlands and flowers in Spring.

This plant is easily overlooked as it rarely grows very high and is often hidden amongst taller plants.

Ref:
Perkins, E. 2016, *Plants of Castlemaine District*
Cunningham, G. M., Mulham, W.E., Milthorp, P.I., Leigh, J. H. 1992, *Plants of Western NSW.*

Mystery Bird – Nigel Harland

Well, the bird last month was a native and a touch more attractive than the Blackbird! The bird shown was, of course, the Eastern Spinebill. It is a member of the Honeyeater family which can be found in gardens providing sufficient food, typically from Grevilleas and Banksias of various species. Otherwise it can be found in sclerophyll forests from Northern Queensland to the Flinders Ranges, south of the Divide. Once you have heard the call, it is difficult to forget, a very rapid piping call.

It has a cousin found in Western Australian, the Western Spinebill. It is similarly marked, but sufficiently different to enable you to be able to identify it. The ranges of the two species do not overlap.

At times like these it is interesting to contemplate how two very similar species came to exist. I guess it is most likely that there was only one species originally and that gradually their ranges separated and their plumage developed individual characteristics. Perhaps others among you may have better knowledge than me, or perhaps other theories. It would be interesting to know.

Whilst you contemplate, you might like to try your luck in identifying the bird for this month.

Spring birds from the Train – 5 November 2016

By Chris Timewell

On a recent train ride to Melbourne from Castlemaine, I missed out on a window seat heading down there, but managed to get one on the way home. The outside weather conditions at the time of this mid-afternoon trip were not ideal for birdwatching (relatively windy and overcast), but not too bad.

Unlike my other recent lists of fauna seen from the train (from 31 Dec 2015 and 11-12 July 2016), this time I was looking on the east side. I also recorded the numbers of individuals for each species seen, although sometimes this was a best estimate when there were big flocks zooming past. The species seen are listed in the table below. I have marked species those that hadn't been recorded at all in previous lists (**).

In all, I saw 24 bird species and no free-living mammals or other vertebrate fauna. The highlights were a pair of Brown Falcons in low flight just north of the Calder Roadhouse, and a Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoo flying out of a Radiata pine near Clarkefield station. The domestic geese were seen in a pond within a public park in Riddell's Creek.

***Key to Train Sections:* 1 = Castlemaine-Kyneton (24 minutes), 2 = Kyneton-Woodend (8 mins), 3=Woodend-Gisborne (10 mins), 4=Gisborne-Sunbury (18 mins), 5=Sunbury-Southern Cross (33 mins)**

	Melb to Castlemaine				
Species Sections	**#5**	**#4**	**#3**	**#2**	**#1**
Australian Wood Duck		1		5	
Domestic goose		6			
Cormorant sp.	1				
White-faced Heron		2			
Australian Kestrel	1				2
Brown Falcon	2				
Silver Gull	41				
Crested Pigeon		1			
Spotted Dove	4				
Rock Dove	72			5	2
Galah		1		1	
Long-billed Corella	8				
Corella sp.		1		1	3
Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoo		1			
Rainbow Lorikeet	2				
Red-rumped Parrot	1				
Red Wattlebird					1
Magpie Lark	3				
Australian Magpie	4	23	4	22	14
Little Raven	7				
Raven sp.	19	40	2	3	6
Welcome Swallow	1	2			

Species Sections	Melb to Castlemaine				
	#5	#4	#3	#2	#1
House Sparrow	6	1	2	2	1
Common Blackbird	1				
Common Myna	11	2			
Common Starling	76	33		47	104
TOTAL BIRD SPECIES COUNT	17 sp.	13 sp.	3 sp.	8 sp.	8 sp.
	24 species				

Castlemaine Field Naturalist Club
- looking forward to 2017.

Many hands make light work - we need some more hands on deck!

Our club has been running successfully for 40 years with members willing to help in a variety of ways. Please think about how you might help out - whether the task be big or small, rotating jobs on a regular basis and sharing the load builds a resource of people who can step in when needed making the load lighter for all.

* Consider becoming a committee member (committee meetings are held on the third Thursday at 6pm). Nomination forms will be included in your December mailout.
* Consider volunteering for a small job to assist with the smooth running of a meeting or excursion.
* Setting up the room
* Greet and welcome new people to meetings
* Supper duties
* Display of publications/name badges etc
* Setting up the microphone /projector
* Contribute articles for the newsletter or
* if you have publishing skills you might want to give Noel a well earned break and try your hand at being Newsletter Editor.
* Suggest a guest speaker or 2017 programme or volunteer to give a talk yourself.
* Suggest and lead an excursion or suggest someone else to lead an excursion?

If you can help in 2017 please talk to a committee member.

Our Orchid Leaf Project

Early in the year we launched an effort to find and photograph the leaves of local orchids in response to a request by Ern, so he could add to the Orchid section of his Wild Plants of the Castlemaine District . Members responded enthusiastically and in August set about observing and photographing leaves and revisiting them in flower to confirm their identity.

It would be good to continue this work and add our photos and information to Ern's Orchid section some time in the future. If you would like to contribute, I am happy to collect and collate relevant material for future reference work next year. You can contact me to discuss the best method to do this.

Geraldine Harris (gedharris@castlemaine.net or mob 0407 663 109)

Return of USB Sticks -

Return USB Sticks of Wild Plants of the Castlemaine District at a future meeting. The current version is 1e. We hope this will be an ongoing project for the club when we find a suitable person to carefully carry on Ern's work.

Our Christmas Meeting

Traditionally we celebrate the end of the year with a collection of member items - be as creative as you like - you may want to show some special photos, sing a song, recite a poem or introduce us to a new nature resource. Allow about five minutes for each item and bring a small plate of supper to share. Come along and bring a friend, and enjoy the various contributions!

PS This is your last chance to guess how many pistachios in the jar - the winner of the competition will be announced at the December meeting!

- Geraldine Harris

Observations

◆ Pair of Shovellers with two chicks on Bells Swamp and Painted Honeyeaters and Reed Warblers calling at Daylesford Lake Nov. 10; Sacred Kingfisher Botanical gardens Nov 19; Painted Honeyeaters calling Railway Dam Nov 20; Blue-faced Honeyeaters reported Martin St. - Noel Young

◆ Denis Hurley encountered a 'good sized fast moving Brown snake on the back porch', a full sized Shingleback near the warm house; and at Expedition Pass "not many birds - 2 Black Cormorants, a Pacific Black Duck with six well grown young, a female Musk Duck with two juveniles. The grooming and burning of about half the reeds earlier this year could be the reason - 44 Eurasian coot in June to just two birds last week".

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists
Coming events

Fri Dec 9 meeting: Members night - break-up for 2016

Member's "show and tell" - share a few photos, a nature experience, a poem - be as creative as you like. And bring a plate to share for supper.

Fri Feb 10 2017: Annual General Meeting

Please think about volunteering to *share the load!*

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

Club website (Web master: Chris Timewell) - http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/

Subscriptions for 2016
Ordinary membership: Single $30, Family $40
Pensioner or student: Single $25, Family $30
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

2016 Committee

President:	Nigel Harland		5474 8246
Secretary:	George Broadway	georgebroadway@bigpond.com	5472 2513
Treasurer:	Geoff Harris		

Geraldine Harris	5474 2244	Richard Piesse	0448 572 867
Peter Turner	5470 6891	Noel Young (Editor)	5472 1345

[email newsletter material to: **noel.young@optusnet.com.au**]

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.
Inc #A0003010B